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Chapter

Seasons, Family and Nation in *American Horror Story*

Derek Johnston

Arguably, the title of *American Horror Story* sets out an agenda for the program: this is not just a horror story, but ~~it is~~ a particularly American one. This chapter examines the way that the program uses seasonal celebrations as a way of expressing that national identity, with special emphasis on the importance of family to those celebrations. The particular seasonal celebrations focused on are those of Halloween and Christmas, each of which has associations with the supernatural. However, the use of the supernatural at those seasons is one which is particularly associated with the US, presenting Halloween as a time of supernatural incursion and horror, and of disruption to society and the normal order of things, while Christmas is presented more as a time of unity for the family. Where the supernatural emerges in American Christmas television, it is typically as a force to encourage togetherness and reconciliation, rather than as a dark reminder of the past. While these interpretations of these festivals have been broadcast abroad by American cultural products, not least American television, they have different associations and implications elsewhere. So the particular uses of these festivals is part of what marks *American Horror Story* out as American, as is the way that the program's narratives have been structured to fit in with US television scheduling. This chapter, then, argues that the structures of the narratives combine with their use of the festivals of Halloween and Christmas in order to enhance the sense of this series as a particularly American horror story.

This is not to claim that seasonality is central to *American Horror Story*, but it does play a part in the stories and contributes to the identity of the series. In this way the show is not unlike many other programs. Indeed, because this is not a major aspect of the program,

but rather a more subtle and underlying expression of broadcast and cultural traditions, this is arguably more important than more obvious elements, certainly in relation to national identity. However, the very fact that *American Horror Story* shares this practice with many other programs is significant in that the show is regularly positioned as being something different from the norm.

This chapter shows that *American Horror Story* uses the seasonal markers of Halloween and Christmas in ways that relate to their wider usage in American culture, including the media. While it draws on episodes and narratives from across the run of the show, it pays particular attention to the first two seasons: *Murder House* and *Asylum*. Halloween and Christmas in *American Horror Story* serve as festivals of inversion and subversion, but also ultimately of reversion to the status quo, in line with the claims of structuralist anthropologist Victor Turner (176–177). They allow the disempowered to hold power briefly, but only at the specific time allocated to them. They allow for the policing of social boundaries and mores, and they allow for celebration and relaxation and revelry, not always operating in harmony with each other. They ultimately reinforce the boundaries of the community and its identity as a community. However, in *American Horror Story*, the community is often an unwilling one, or at least somewhat resistant to unity, and the festivals serve as opportunities to highlight, and so potentially to heal, the fractures within those communities. In the same way these festivals serve in wider American culture as a way of bringing together communities, policing their boundaries and behaviors, and also having a party, while ultimately reinstating the normative power structures after the permitted inversions and subversions of the festival.

What is American about *American Horror Story*?

It would be easy to say that *American Horror Story* is American simply because it is made in the United States for a domestic audience, with settings in the US and mostly American performers. But the concept of American horror and the questions of national identity go further than that. They are part of the narratives with which the show engages, and their frameworks within American culture and concerns. They are part of the unstated preconceptions around ways of behaving, around the dressing of sets, the use of props and costumes, and around the incorporation of cultural concepts, including holidays and the relationship with the changing seasons. In other words, this is what Michael Billig has termed “banal nationalism”, in which:

In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building (8).

These unconscious and unintentional reminders of the ‘Americanness’ of *American Horror Story* will go largely unnoticed by a US audience, and the international spread of US television also means that they will be sufficiently familiar to many international viewers that they are simply accepted there, albeit as markers of a familiar difference. There is not the sense that this is something local, but rather that this is what is normal for the US.

~~As covered in the various chapters in this collection, *American Horror Story* contains an inclusive view of the horrors of American life and society. It is concerned with family, with inheritance, with property and economy. It also delves into or touches on race, serial killers, urban legends. There are echoes of horrors real and imaginary, from the real-world murders featuring The Black Dahlia and the Axeman of New Orleans, to fictional tales of deformed children held in the attic. Even ageing is a recurring horror, particularly focused around characters played by Jessica Lange, drawing on her history as an actress and model; we are familiar with her youthful looks as an ingénue in *King Kong* (John Guillermin, 1976),~~

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as a frustrated young wife in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981), and so have a sense of what may be felt to be ‘lost’ through ageing to one of her characters. There are elements of *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), of *Rosemary’s Baby* (novel 1967, film Roman Polanski 1968), *The Changeling* (Peter Medak, 1980), and a number of other texts, including musical reference to *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) and direct discussion of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), and that’s just in the first season of the show. Reaching out into the other seasons, the horror of the body, of madness, of alien abduction, of racism, and a range of others are brought into play. If anything, *American Horror Story* is almost excessively, baroquely referential and inclusive in its raids on American horror culture, whether in reference to individual texts, to genres, or to general cultural fears.

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What is ‘American Horror’?

As covered in the various chapters in this collection, *American Horror Story* contains an inclusive view of the horrors of American life and society. If anything, *American Horror Story* is almost excessively, baroquely referential and inclusive in its raids on American horror culture, whether in reference to individual texts, to genres, or to general cultural fears.

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As this chapter argues that the use of seasonality in *American Horror Story* is part of its particularly American approach to horror, it seems important to establish what ‘American horror’ actually is. Of course, here the American aspect refers to the US specifically, rather than Canada, Mexico, or any of the other nations in the Americas. It also refers to modern US society, drawing more on European immigrant cultures than native cultures and traditions. Horror is both universal and culturally specific. The sensation of being horrified, the experience of fear, is known throughout humanity, with many of the main causes of disgust and fear being shared across cultures, such as death and decay and violence, but the specific

causes of horror are more particular to individual cultures at particular historical times. The ways that US commercial horror has operated in literature and in other media differ from the ways that commercial horror has operated in other cultures. However, as with so much of US culture, American strength in the international entertainment industries has meant that the iconography of American horror is familiar worldwide. Nevertheless, when it comes to understanding and interpreting the specificities of American horror, critics have identified a number of key concerns which separate it out from other national expressions of the genre.

Central to these concerns is the idea that the nation is new, and lacks the connections to the past that European or other countries have. This ends up presenting the pre-Columbian history of the Americas as something ancient, mystical, and as potent a source of terror as the pagan history of Europe, a “gnawing awareness that America as a nation has been built on stolen ground” (Murphy 104). However, this view not only ignores the actuality of pre-Columbian history in favor of demonizing it, it also ignores most of the over-400 years of history that has developed since North America began to be permanently colonized by Europeans (which itself is to set aside the brief establishment of the Vinland colony in around 1000CE).

What it does not ignore is the importance of certain historical events and the character of certain aspects of US history. Where European, particularly English, Gothic would repeatedly present the Catholic Church as an old scourge, for the US it is slavery that is the deep scar in the culture. As Teresa A. Goddu puts it, “Over and over again, American authors turn to the Gothic mode in order to disclose the ghostly origins of the nation as issuing from the oppressive social structure of slavery” (63). This is clearly particularly relevant with regard to *American Horror Story: Coven*, but is also part of the general idea that American horror deals primarily with the differences between ideals and pragmatism, whether those are

the ideals of the new colonies, or of the Puritans, or the ideals of peaceful twentieth century suburbs. In this conception, the horror of America is America itself.

One particular Puritan legacy to the American character can be seen in its relationship with the supernatural. The Puritan church saw attacks by supernatural forces as proof of righteousness. The Devil, it was reasoned, would not waste time on victimizing those who were already damned, but would instead concentrate on those who were good. As Cotton and Increase Mather wrote at the time, “it is a vexing *Eye-sore* to the Devil, that our Lord Christ should be known, and own’d, and preached in this *howling Wilderness*. Wherefor he has left no *Stone unturned*, that so he might undermine his plantation, and force us out of our Country” (Mather 74, *italics in original*). This attitude not only kept the Puritan colonists alert to the possibility that any problems they faced may be the work of an evil supernatural force, but also reinforced their sense of being special: if we are being victimized by the Devil, then it must be because we are essentially Good (Madsen 22). When translated outward, this can be seen as an influence on the American culture of exceptionalism, and the recurring sense of the USA as an embattled nation facing constant, external threats from various sources, which may all be different aspects of an overarching, existential evil. *American Horror Story* certainly draws on this tradition, but by making supernatural and other ‘outsider’ characters sympathetic, by presenting those opposed to the supernatural as unsympathetic, and by presenting a variety of characterization for supernatural and non-supernatural characters, it takes what can initially seem to be certainties and reveals the complications that underlie them.

Yet at different times American horror has taken on different characteristics as the dominant culture has changed. The haunted house, for example, can be related to the nation as a place haunted by its unknown, pre-Columbian history, particularly in the trope of the house built upon a Native American graveyard (Bailey 57). But it can also be related to the horrors

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of the economy, becoming trapped in a building that cannot be afforded, as in *The Amityville Horror* (book Jay Anson, 1977; film 1979, 2005) or *American Horror Story: Murder House*, or with the house itself symbolizing class and economic difference, as in *The People Under the Stairs* (Wes Craven, 1991). The idea of possession itself carries a doubled implication, of ownership both legal and supernatural.

While American horror is not unique in placing the family at its center, there is a particular focus on the family and ‘family values’ within the culture of the US, re-emphasized every year at Thanksgiving, when broadcast drama stresses the unity of the family as paramount. Within horror, the family can as frequently be a source of fear and disruption as it is a source of protection and happiness. We need only think of examples such as the cannibal families of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977), or the nonhuman representatives of the wealthy upper-classes literally feeding on the ordinary in *Society* (Brian Yuzna, 1989). Indeed, Tony Williams has seen the family horror film as part of an “important American cultural tradition of protest against domestic constraint” (Williams 27).

The family is centered on the home, and each season of *American Horror Story* is based around a family, albeit mostly a non-biological and highly dysfunctional one, brought together into a community. The community is the home that keeps them all together, whether it is a literal house, ~~as in Seasons One and Three,~~ an asylum, a hotel, or a travelling freak show. Concerns with family, love, inheritance and reproduction occur across the series, indicating their central positions in the American psyche. These concerns around family, as something that binds together disparate people, are supported by the use of seasonal gatherings and festivities throughout the series.

Broadcasting Seasons, Calendar Seasons

As Karen Lury has stated, drawing on the work of Paddy Scannell, “At the grandest scale, television marks the passing of years, and of each year – television’s relaying of seasons (Christmas, summer) echoes and confirms the passing of the real seasons for the television viewer” (98). This occurs in a number of ways. There is the regular cycle of the television seasons, with new episodes being broadcast at particular times of the year. These cycles are in part determined by other calendars, including sporting calendars, with major events such as the Super Bowl being fixed spots in the US television year. However, this chapter is concerned with the representation of the seasons in drama, and the ways that this practice connects to the experience of the viewer and their understanding of the calendar year.

Broadcast seasons operate closely with calendar seasons, but they are not tied directly to them. Jason Mittell notes that “Many series follow the time of year that episodes air, with specific episodes for holidays such as Christmas or Halloween, a specific time scheme that loses meaning when a show is watched in reruns or on DVD” (224). This is also an issue in that, while many ongoing dramas can be seen to approximate the calendar seasons of when they are broadcast, increasing the potential levels of connection between audience and characters, the vagaries of television scheduling can lead to a separation between the diegetic season of the show and the calendar season experienced by the viewer. This is particularly evident in the case of repeats, and also in terms of international exports of programs, where the broadcast occurs weeks, or even months, apart from the original broadcast schedule, or, as Mittell points out, when viewed later through DVD or another on-demand system. Hence a Halloween episode in the US may be viewed at Christmas in the UK, or at any other point in the year.

However, the associations with particular seasons are strong enough and have been reinforced sufficiently through televisual traditions that they are not completely lost with the move to a different context. A Christmas episode may not be engaged with as strongly in the

summer, but the viewer understands the context of Christmas and has an emotional engagement with and memory of the celebration of the festival, whether it is actually Christmas or not. Similarly, once it is realized that particular types of narrative are associated with particular times of year, the patterns of seasonal engagement within broadcast television allow seasonal episodes to be identified even when the outward trappings of the festival are not part of the episode's diegesis. In this way, once a UK viewer of US television has realized that programs in supposedly rational or real-world genres, like hospital or detective shows, often include a touch of the irrational at Halloween, it becomes possible to identify the Halloween episode of a series whenever it is encountered in the calendar year, whether there are jack o'lanterns and trick-or-treaters on-screen or not (see Johnston).

There are also two types of broadcasting seasons to be considered. The first is the organizational unit of the broadcast season: a group of episodes which are produced under an organizational contract; in the case of *American Horror Story*, each of these broadcast seasons tells a single story, whether that is *Murder House*, *Asylum*, *Coven*, *Freak Show* or *Hotel*. These broadcast seasons then form part of the broader broadcasting season, which may be identified as a summer season, an autumn season, or simply as a 'new season'. These broadcasting seasons tend, like the calendar seasons, to merge into each other rather than being clearly differentiated, but there are various markers that indicate the shift from one to another. These may be the presence of particular events, often tied to the wider cultural calendar, and may also be the presence of a few weeks of 'filler' programming such as repeats and specials. Over all of this lie the financial calendars of the producers and broadcasters, into which their production budgets have to fit.

John Ellis has argued that "any [broadcasting] schedule contains the distillation of the past history of a channel, of national broadcasting as a whole, and of the particular habits of national life" (26). This last point in particular is central to the ideas covered in this chapter.

Essentially, the way that a nation has developed its interaction with the seasons will influence the way its broadcasting relates to and uses the seasons. Patterns of work and worship that have developed over centuries will have influenced when particular holidays are held and how they are marked. The history that has shaped the nation will influence when and how particular historical events are commemorated, so that the US Thanksgiving and Independence Day commemorate events specific to the nation, and their cultural significance and opportunities for (re-)interpretation. The agricultural calendar will have influenced the academic and political and sporting calendars, which in turn will influence the types of programming eventually broadcast at different times of the year. The seasonal changes in weather will also affect programming: when the weather is dry, warm and pleasant, people are more likely to engage in outdoors activities away from the television, so broadcasters will tend to show repeats, and cheap imports, and other types of less expensive programming, saving their expensive new investments for times when they have the opportunity to attract larger audiences, sheltering from the weather.

This means that seasonal episodes will carry with them indicators of their original season. In part, this is carried out through fairly obvious on-screen signifiers, from the mentioning of time of year in dialogue, on-screen dates, to the foliage on trees, or the explicit or implicit celebration of a particular festival marked through specific decorations, actions, clothing or music. But, as has already been stated, the indicators of the festival can also be less direct, as when particular types of narrative become associated with particular festivals. Thus, when *Grey's Anatomy* or *Hawaii Five-0* or *Castle* include an episode in which there appear to be zombies, it is almost certainly a Halloween episode, even if the characters are not themselves marking Halloween. Similarly, any episode which focuses to a greater, more explicit extent than usual on the idea of family and the need to maintain and reinforce a familial unit, whether biological or not, is likely to have originally been scheduled around

Thanksgiving or Christmas. In this way, particular narrative tropes and genres become associated with particular times of the year, and those times of the year become associated with those tropes and genres, in a self-reinforcing relationship.

Halloween

~~Of course,~~ *American Horror Story*, as a horror series, does not have the same immediate signifier of a special Halloween episode that series such as the aforementioned *Grey's Anatomy*, *Castle* or *Hawaii Five-0* have, in the form of the eruption of the abnormal into the mundane, as this disruption is a basic and constant aspect of horror narratives. ~~And yet~~ Yet Halloween plays an important role within *American Horror Story*, in large part because of the festival's role in American culture. As Nicholas Rogers has argued, "if modern-day Halloween increasingly celebrates difference, it also represents American-ness. This is especially true for immigrants to North America, but it is also the case in countries where American culture is aggressively marketed" (Rogers 9–10). Exported around the world by American media, the North American Halloween has become a marker of difference, of modernity, of commercialism, and all of those other symbolic values attributed to the idea of the United States. It is either embraced, or it is rejected as a foreign invader not compatible with traditional culture and values (see, e.g. Cardús, Mikos, Prokhorova, Helsloot and Jontes in Foley and O'Donnell).

The US Halloween of today developed from traditions imported from Scotland and Ireland by immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Where the original traditions were closely tied up with divination, the holiday in the Americas focused more on the social aspects of the festival, combining with the social aspects drawn from other immigrant traditions. Indeed, Rogers argues that the festival became a way of celebrating disparate Irish and Scottish communities and traditions, while also encouraging members of other

communities to interact with and experience goodwill towards the Scots and Irish populations (50–51). However, this did lead to the celebrations becoming known as an excuse for rowdiness, following on from those earlier traditions in which members of the community, particularly young males, would police the boundaries of the community and punish those seen as transgressors through a series of tricks, such as overturning outhouses, stealing gates, and shooting flame through their keyholes from hollowed-out cabbage stalks.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this led to increased attempts to police the carnivalesque rowdiness, and to create more formal events and more polite and domestic, and commercialized, ways to celebrate Halloween, with magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal* or *Werner's Readings and Recitations* offering advice on how to host a Halloween party. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, Halloween in the US has had a tension between the public and the domestic, expanding out into street parties, themed [club](#) nights ~~at clubs~~, and horror houses. At the same time, concerns for children's safety have led to increased policing of and restrictions on trick-or-treating, an activity that used to present a way to build community connections by reinforcing neighborliness and marking out those perceived to be outsiders to the community. Halloween has also moved into broadcasting, being marked by seasonal episodes, such as the ones covered here, which can be seen as encouraging a passive observation of the festival in the safety of the home, rather than an active participation outside in the community.

Turner has interpreted Halloween and its believed pagan origins as the Celtic festival of Samhain as a social purgation, claiming:

it would appear that... Samhain represented a seasonal expulsion of evils, and a renewal of fertility associated with cosmic and chthonic powers. In European folk beliefs, the midnight of October 31 has become associated with gatherings of the hellish powers of witchcraft and the devil, as in *Walpurgisnacht* and Tam o'Shanter's [sic] near-fatal Halloween. Subsequently, a strange alliance has been formed between the innocent and the wicked, children and witches, who purge the community by the mock pity and terror of trick or treat and prepare the way for communitas feasts of sunlike pumpkin pie – at least in the United States. Somehow, as dramatists and

novelists well know, a touch of sin and evil seems to be necessary tinder for the fires of *communitas* – although elaborate ritual mechanisms have to be provided to transmute those fires from devouring to domestic uses (Turner 183, *italics in original*).

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This supposed connection of the modern Halloween to Samhain is the one that Travis relates to Adelaide in *Murder House* (“Halloween, Pt. 1”), explaining to his lover’s daughter why

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people dress up at this time of year, while also informing the audience that this episode is set at Halloween and reminding them that this is a time when the dead can walk freely abroad.

While there is dispute over just how closely Halloween is related to Samhain, particularly in the way that it is celebrated, the idea that this is a pagan survival is one that has found a strong root in popular culture. More significantly for *Murder House*, there is the idea of the festival as a purgation of society through supernatural means, shown in the way that the murderous, now-dead, Tate is confronted by the spirits of those that he had killed years before in a high school shooting, on the only night that it is possible for them to meet, as the places that they haunt are geographically separated (“Halloween, Pt. 2”).

However, *American Horror Story* twists this trope, as there can be no reconciliation and reinstatement of normality following this confrontation, as Tate exists in forgetful ignorance of his guilt. As Ben, the psychotherapist whose purchase of the titular ‘Murder House’ in order to reunite his family is the originating event of the series’ narrative, tells Tate in the final episode of the season, “Afterbirth”, Tate is a charismatic psychopath, whose murderous nature is untreatable by therapy, which is just a narrative that people use to make themselves feel comfortable. The same can be said of the spell that the medium Billie Dean had suggested the family use to exorcise the house, but which turned out not to work (“Birth”). This can be interpreted as relating to horror stories in general, blaming supernatural sources for the things that have been done by ordinary humans, and the way that the house represents a building up of history and stories in one place emphasizes the way that human history is an aggregation of narratives and events that cannot be escaped. If *American Horror*

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Story: Murder House represents America in any way, it does so by reminding us of the murderous piling up of history, and says that the only reconciliation that is possible is one that sets the conflicts of the past aside and gathers together a new family to protect the future, which the show presents through a peaceful familial Christmas, albeit one of ghosts, as the glowering, resentful forces of past mistakes and horrors watch on (“Afterbirth”).

As far as *Murder House* is concerned, its original transmission closely matched the dates inside the episodes. Larry’s statement that he follows all seven days of Halloween, because it is the only time of year when he feels that he can walk around freely, considering his burns, not only connects to the traditional extended Halloween season, but incorporates it more closely into the schedule of the program. This integrates the two episodes set on the same Halloween night, but broadcast each side of the actual calendar Halloween, marking seven nights of celebration. Similarly, the season finale, which brings the central narrative of the season to an end with a celebration of Christmas, was originally broadcast on December 21. This paralleling of the viewer’s calendar with the calendar within the program recurs to a certain extent across each season of *American Horror Story*, but with the focal fixed point where diegetic date and non-diegetic date most closely coincide being Halloween. *Asylum*’s “Tricks and Treats” was broadcast the week before Halloween, on October 24 2012, while its Christmas-set episode, “Unholy Night” was broadcast on December 5, with only one further episode before the season took a two-week break. The first Halloween-set episode of *Coven*, “Fearful Pranks Ensurue”, was broadcast on October 30 2013, with the following episode, “Burn, Witch, Burn”, also containing portions set during Halloween. Similarly, *Freak Show*’s two episodes entitled “Edward Mordrake” appeared on October 22 and 29, and were set at Halloween, but the familial reconstruction occurs at Halloween in the narrative, in the January 21 episode “Curtain Call”, disrupting this overall pattern. The fourth episode of *Hotel* is “Devil’s Night”, broadcast on October 28 2015, in which ghostly serial killers take up an

annual one-night residence at the titular hotel, although the episode set at Halloween, “Room Service”, was first broadcast on November 4.

This demonstrates the problems with fitting a heavily serialized story, where the main plot occurs within a fairly tight time-frame, into the weekly-episode model of most broadcast television. The calendar time of the episodes can be made to generally align with that of the outside world, to meet specific points, but the movement of time at different paces in the fictional world and in the viewer’s world disrupts the alignment. Nevertheless, Halloween presents the central calendar point of each season of *American Horror Story*, emphasizing the festival’s centrality to ideas of horror entertainment in the US. It can also be seen to extend the Halloween season to the seven days that Larry mentions in *Murder House*, something that happened in various parts of North America during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as festivities around Halloween and Bonfire Night¹ (~~November 5, in which Americans of English extraction would follow the English custom of celebrating the defeat of a 1605 Catholic plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament and King James I~~) combined into an extended fire festival. This is particularly so where the festivities straddle a weekend, which is when most people will feel that they have the time to set up or take part in some sort of party or celebration, at the same time enhancing the feeling of the festivities as breaking from the norm in that they take place outside the schedule established by the working or educational ~~schedule~~week.

As with the ghosts of *Murder House* only being able to leave the grounds of the house on Halloween, *Freak Show* presents Halloween as a time when the ghosts of the past return, with Edward Mordrake’s haunting of freak shows on that night in order to find new members for his ghostly entourage. Similarly, *Hotel* ~~presented~~presents Halloween as being a time for the gathering of the spirits of dead serial killers, an annual ‘booking’ which emphasizes the sense of seasonal recurrence and repetition in these narratives. Halloween is also presented as

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a time for disguises, and a time for horrors to be abroad and accepted because others are in disguise. This mixes American traditions of Halloween: the social and the mythic. The mythic is the conception that this is a night in which supernatural beings actually do move abroad amongst mortals. The social is one which presents the night as a time to dress up and to have a party. It is a time for social mixing which reintegrates the community, as shown by the acceptance of horrific beings such as the ghosts of dead teenagers showing the wounds that killed them in *Murder House*. What should be horrific is accepted as merely good costuming and make-up by ordinary people.

But *American Horror Story* uses these accepted patterns and shows the party of Halloween to be underlain by or to contain the potential for horror, which has arguably been softened by commercialization and the making safe of the festival for children. In *Asylum*, masked and costumed children calling at the door of Lana and Wendy's house – as an early trick or treat on the night before Halloween – are followed by the invasion of the house by [a](#) [the](#) masked and costumed serial killer Bloody Face ("Tricks and Treats"). The desire to be somebody else which is a part of the play of Halloween is turned to tragedy in *Murder House* with Adelaide's desire to be a "pretty girl" ("Halloween, Pt. 1"), with the mask that makes that dream real for her literally blinding her to the dangers on the road as she tries to join the popular girls, to fit in, with the result being that she is hit by a car and killed.

Halloween specials often present a disruption to the norms of a television series, with the supernatural frequently making an appearance in non-supernatural programming. With *American Horror Story*, the norms of the series are intentionally hard to define. While each series might have a central theme, this serves more as a central location in which to bring together a range of horror narratives, with each season in many ways presenting variations on themes that recur through the series as a whole, and through horror fictions more broadly. However, there is an element of this disruption in *Murder House*, where Halloween provides

the possibility for the ghosts to roam abroad and travel beyond the grounds of the house. In *Freak Show*, the arrival of Edward Mordrake and his ghosts introduces a supernatural element not present in the rest of the season (“Edward Mordrake, Pts. 1 and 2”). Freak show lore states that performing on Halloween will summon the spirit of Edward Mordrake, a man with a second face on the back of his head who murdered his entire freak show troupe one Halloween before committing suicide, and who now returns to take a soul from any freak show that performs on that night. Knowing this, Elsa, the frustrated performer who had finally found her way to success in show-business, finally agrees to perform in a television Halloween special when she discovers that her dark past as a brothel dominatrix who had her legs severed in a torture film has been uncovered and that her new mainstream career was over (“Curtain Call”). This addition provides for the conclusion of the season’s narrative, forming a dark reflection of Christmas in which Elsa finally finds contentment with her freak show family in the afterlife. However, what is more important about Halloween to *American Horror Story* as a whole is its association as the central ‘horror’ holiday in the US, unlike Christmas, which is usually seen as a holiday for reconciliation and happiness.

Christmas

While Mark Connelly argues that, “For the English Christmas had always meant home. It was this quality that made the English Christmas different from its celebration anywhere else” (11), it is the American Christmas which seems to be even more focused on the joys of family. Connelly himself suggests that “Perhaps it is a reflection of the fact that the USA, sprawling so rapidly and on the crest of such a cosmopolitan wave, needed to stress the unity of the family as a microcosm of the wider family of the nation” (165). This unity of the nation/family came to be a key part of the winter season festivals, particularly focused around Thanksgiving and Christmas. This was aided by the way that the celebration of Christmas

developed from being a time of revelry and carnival, in which “the social hierarchy itself was symbolically turned upside down, in a gesture that inverted designated roles of gender, age, and class” (Nissenbaum 8), and transformed into a domesticated celebration, in much the same way as would later happen with Halloween. As a result of this, and the growing connection between Christmas and the pleasures of consumption, American reviewers and viewers have tended to reject the darker aspects of Christmas narratives, such as *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and replaced them with the importance of family and reconciliation. Indeed, author and essayist Michael Chabon has described the English tradition of ghost stories at Christmas, when “it is apparently traditional to sit by a crackling yule fire and scare one’s friends out of their wits. (And it would be hard to imagine anything more English than that)” (111).

This would seem to suggest that there is something un-American about connecting horror to Christmas, and it is notable that *American Horror Story* marks Halloween in each of its seasons, but has only included a Christmas-set episode in its first two seasons. In doing so, it draws upon two existing uses of Christmas in relation to the supernatural in US popular culture: familial reconciliation and the Santa-themed serial killer. The series rejects the English tradition of the Christmas ghost story found in the work of people like M.R. James, which uses the supernatural as a source of terror rather than reconciliation. It also, so far, has avoided a more recent development in Christmas horror, adopting and adapting the Germanic folkloric figure of Krampus, who was responsible for punishing the naughty while Saint Nicholas took care of the nice. The growing popularity of Krampus in North American popular culture includes episodes of *Grimm* (“Twelve Days of Krampus”, 2013) and *Lost Girl* (“Groundhog Fae”, 2013), as well as the films *Krampus* (Michael Dougherty, 2015) and *A Christmas Horror Story* (Grant Harvey, Steven Hoban and Brett Sullivan, 2015). This avoidance of this newer aspect of the US Christmas points to the way that *American Horror*

Story draws on the longer traditions of American horror, depending upon long-standing associations which tie these traditions more closely to American identity than more recent developments and adoptions such as Krampus.

This chapter has already noted that Christmas is used in *Murder House* to present a sense of a new start for the house, with the forces of past irrationality and mistakes glowering from outside the protected and protective circle of light around the family that has united to protect the future. Where *Murder House* uses Christmas as a setting for resolution and a, somewhat twisted, familial reconciliation, *Asylum* ties in to other Christmas horror media. In particular, *Asylum*'s murderous Santa (Leigh Emerson, "Unholy Night" and "The Coat Hanger") represents a loss of innocence and a disruption of the familial ideal that is supposed to be part of Christmas. The character's initial trauma is revealed to be that, while serving time as a petty juvenile thief, he was raped by prison warders who were going around the cells singing Christmas carols, wearing Santa hats. The character serves as a further link to the serial killer film, most particularly the Christmas serial killer film, going back at least as far as the 1974 Canadian film *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark). However, it draws more strongly on the US film *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (Charles E. Sellier, Jr., 1984), where a killer who was abused during childhood dresses as Santa to enact what he sees as the justified punishment of the naughty. As with *Murder House*, then, we are presented with narratives in which the horrors of the past keep returning to haunt us, and the stories that we tell ourselves and each other are simply comforts to avoid facing the realities of life. Emerson may dress as Santa to enact his crimes, but he does so with the sense that he is telling the truth about the season: that there is no Santa Claus, only a man who can find his way into your house at night and judge you.

The use of Christmas in only two seasons of *American Horror Story* fits with the series' associations with wider American horror culture and television. In American

television, the supernatural is not uncommon at Christmas, but it usually presents in one of three ways, two based on existing texts. There is the adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, and there is also the variation on *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). Finally, there is the narrative in which it turns out that there really is a Santa Claus. Each of these narratives presents a family-centered, happy version of Christmas and its relationship with the supernatural. The supernatural is presented through these as a means of reconciliation, particularly of reconciliation within the family, or it is presented as a way of rewarding 'goodness' in the form of Santa Claus, who thus acts to reassure the protagonist that their choices have been the right ones. The same narrative can be found in the variations on *It's a Wonderful Life*. Meanwhile, *A Christmas Carol* holds out the possibility of redemption through mending the bonds of family, as Connelly pointed out (quoted above), and particularly by reinforcing familial and social bonds through engaging with the capitalist structures of US society, i.e. by buying things.

American Horror Story does not present problems that can be solved by conspicuous consumption. Indeed, *Murder House* is particularly about the problems of becoming trapped by the collapse of the housing market, about the horror of having financially over-extended, about the futility of trying to buy happiness and family unity. The family's potential for future happiness, and their present unity, only comes about once they are completely separated from monetary problems, through death. Even then, they are tied to the house, which can serve as a reminder of the literal meaning of the word 'mortgage': 'death debt'.

The inversion of the happy family Christmas that is presented by the killer Santa in *Asylum* is also an inversion of other Christmas Santa narratives. This is not the real Santa Claus. This is just a murderous man with a Santa fixation, who is not in the end actually that bothered about whether people have been naughty or nice; he just wants to hurt and kill them. The figure of Santa is for him a representation of pain and horror, and it is this rather than any

wider cultural concept of judgment that drives this characterization. In *American Horror Story*, unlike in *Smallville* (“Lexmas”, 2005), *E.R.* (“City of Mercy”, 2006) or *The Twilight Zone* episode ‘The Night of the Meek’ (1960), there is no real Santa Claus; all there is is a man dressed up like Santa.

Asylum thus presents Christmas as a festival of familial happiness that is corrupted and disrupted by the actions of the killer, who destroys the nostalgic and romantic ideals of the holiday. Sister Jude similarly sees the ‘real meaning’ of Christmas as being itself disrupted and corrupted by television, in the form of television holiday specials like *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, with no sign of Christ (“Unholy Night”). She sees this commercialization as being the work of the Devil, distracting people from faith; in this it contributes to one of the main themes of the season: corruption. As Mengele-esque ex-Nazi Dr. Arden represents the corrupt medical science of the Nazis, as the demonically-possessed Sister Mary shows religion corrupted by evil, as the driven Monsignor with his dreams of the Papacy presents religion corrupted by personal ambition, as serial killer Dr. Thredson and his son – the two Bloody Faces – present corrupted mother-son relationships in their treatment of women, as the asylum itself presents the corruption of the ideal of care through the torture that so many of its patients undergo, so Emerson represents the innocence of Christmas corrupted.

While there are undoubtedly a number of reasons that *American Horror Story* has not returned to a Christmas setting, some purely related to the structuring of the narratives that have been created, if it did follow the pattern of other US Christmas supernatural narratives, then this would have the effect of making the series more like a standard US networked program. As with the other programs created by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, *American Horror Story* has been positioned as something that breaches expectations, that does not do what would be expected of a US horror program. However, as can be seen with the Halloween episodes, *American Horror Story* is already beginning to tend towards falling into

normative patterns. This is partly because, as with the other Murphy/Falchuk shows, the series parodies existing cultural forms and expectations, and to do so it needs to represent them. However, Murphy and Falchuk's productions have a tendency to slip away from satirizing to end up adopting the form and characteristics of the genre that it is engaged with. This is perhaps most apparent with *Glee* (2009–2015), which regularly slipped back and forth between revealing the empty fantasy of the high school musical genre, and simply reveling in the fun of producing a musical each week, complete with unabashed moments of learning, happy endings and fantastic song and dance numbers that are not explained away as either fantasies or the product of extensive rehearsal.

Thus, with *American Horror Story*, to present a variation on either the US-version of *A Christmas Carol* or *It's a Wonderful Life* would run the risk of slipping into the typical version of these narratives, and so making the series less 'special'. Here it is worth remembering the way that the series is positioned as a 'quality drama', in part simply by its serial nature, its finite narratives, and its presentation on cable and subscription channels rather than on network programming. But one of the key characteristics of 'quality drama' presented by Robert Thompson is that it is simply "not 'regular' TV" (13). Following standard tropes without giving them some sort of twist would therefore simply be 'ordinary', and would detract from the claimed specialness of the series.

Even so, the way that Halloween has been treated on the program is tending towards the ordinary. This is still in quite broad terms, and the narratives deal with this by utilizing the cultural belief in Halloween as a time when the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, or the natural and the supernatural are thin. The individual seasons engage with this in a variety of ways, but the establishment of a pattern, that there will be an episode which is set at Halloween in which things that are even stranger than usual happen, is a point in which the series is falling into a norm of broadcast drama in the US.

Conclusion

The uses of Christmas and Halloween in *American Horror Story* connect them to their wider uses in popular culture in relation to the supernatural. While Halloween recurs as a point of disruption in the reality of each narrative, Christmas is presented only twice, once as a time of familial reconciliation and the second time as a festival for the family that is corrupted and disrupted. In engaging with the popular cultural associations with these festivals in this way, they serve to tie the program more closely to that wider sense of American identity, in a way that is emphasized by these episodes being synchronized to the actual festivals on first broadcast, so that characters and viewers are experiencing Halloween or Christmas at approximately the same time. This is itself enhanced by particular aspects of Halloween and Christmas, such as trick or treating, or decorating the house, being shared by both viewers and characters. While many of these aspects of these festivals may be shared in other countries, the inflection of them is particular to the culture of the United States, and the reception of the program outside the US will not be as closely linked to the diegetic time of the episodes. In this way, viewers outside the US will not be so closely connected to the seasonal aspects of the series, emphasizing once again that these connections enhance the American-ness of *American Horror Story*.

The uses are also part of the way that the series falls into or utilizes the patterns typical of US network drama, which include the close approximation of the viewer's calendar time with the calendar time within the show's diegesis. The risk of simply emulating the norm is shown in *Murder House*, as are the attempts to subvert these normal practices, presenting a happy(-ish) family Christmas, only the family are primarily united by death, are unable to escape each other, and know that they and new living tenants are still constantly threatened by

the malevolent ghosts. This is not a resolution, just a new and possibly temporary equilibrium. Halloween in each season presents a disruption of the normal order of things, and a direct engagement with the cultural practices around the festival. This is not just the case of the episodes near Halloween having stories relevant to the time of year; this is a presentation of the season of Halloween within the show as being a special time of breached boundaries, which is specifically shown at the calendar time of Halloween, linking the diegetic and the non-diegetic, thinning the boundaries between the world on the screen and the world of the viewer.

This is a result of the other key tension within *American Horror Story*. The program is trying to be something different, to present a twisted version of known tropes, or to bring them together in unusual ways, such as the combination of demonic possession, Nazi medical experimentation and alien abduction narratives in *Asylum*. But to do that, the show also needs to be in some ways ordinary, to highlight the standard ways of doing things in order to show that it is in some way modifying them, whether to surprise or to satirize. The series' very identity as a specifically *American* horror story is therefore reliant on it in some way using and displaying these expected characteristics, such as having a Halloween episode in which the dead are free to walk about and seek vengeance.

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ⁱ [November 5, in which Americans of English extraction would follow the English custom of celebrating the defeat of a 1605 Catholic plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament and King James I](#)